TALKING

An Essay

J. B. PRIESTLEY

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BY

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THE

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TALKING

I

IF TALKING is to be included among our diversions, we must begin by fencing it off from speech in general. Communication by means of articulate sound is one of the necessities of our species; even those races, now almost extinct, such as the Red Indian, which had a contempt for loquacity were compelled to grunt something from time to time. Speech being therefore a necessity, only a special and heightened form of it, known here as talking, can be considered a diversion. Talking is one of the signs and marks of civilisation. The barbarian, no matter where he is found, cannot talk, and both despises and mistrusts those who can. Wherever we meet this attitude towards the pleasant little arts of conversation, we have not far to go before we light upon the woad and scalps, the flint axes and poisoned arrows. Where

talking flourishes, many other admirable things flourish, and there is civilisation. I often think we might justly estimate the quality of an age, not by its great creations, its works of genius, its symphonies and colossal buildings, its codes of law and poetic drama, but by the way in which it contrives to touch with grace the common pattern of our life, exalting the crude necessities into material for art. The age in which people walk and dress and talk beautifully and are unfailingly charming throughout the day's routine has left barbarism far behind and is truly civilised. That such ages have had to be saved from decay by explosions of barbaric energy, by hordes of strong, silent creatures from the outer darkness, as so many of the historians (themselves often learned savages) have told us, does not materially affect the argument. Such ages are ripe and mellow; a little more sunshine and they would be rotten; so the darkness covers them, until once more hard, sour and green, but vigorous, they begin to ripen again. And thereby hangs the tale that may be found in so many of those large volumes that tell us what progress we have made, sometimes

presenting portraits of Socrates and Mr. H. G. Wells, Julius Cæsar and Mr. Lloyd George.

Talking, then, we may consider only a small part of ordinary speech. People may use words all day long, growing hoarse hours before the sun has gone down, and yet win for themselves no reputations as talkers. Cheap-jacks in side streets, brokers on the Chicago Stock Exchange, irate fish-wives, politicians who do not belong to our own party, all these are mighty users of words, for ever making articulate or semi-articulate sounds, but they do not figure in any list of "great talkers." A vast load of converse can be set aside as having nothing to do with our subject. All that crude intercourse by means of which the world's business is carried on, the babble of markets and offices, forms no part of talking. So, too, at the other end of the emotional scale, there are those scattered words of an awful naked simplicity, cries wrung out of the heart, that we utter in moments of unusual stress; and these too must be set aside: Lear and Othello, in their agony, are worlds away from talk. We might say,

at a venture, that any exchange of speech that aims directly at some action, being a means to an end and not (within sensible limits) an end in itself, is outside our subject. But there yet remains a great body of intercourse, neither directly practical nor yet made up of naked and passionate utterances, that we cannot pass as talk.

There is a kind of speech, by no means uncommon, that might be described as atmosphere-creating. Its object is not really communication at all; no ideas are exchanged, little information, indeed little of anything. The persons engaged in it are not really listening to one another; they are enjoying something, but it is not the conversation, it is the situation in which they find themselves, the atmosphere they are helping to create. We all indulge in the practice—it is linked up to some of our happiest moments—but perhaps women indulge in it more than men. You may travel up to town in the same carriage as two ladies, acquaintances who may have met on the platform, bent on a day's shopping. There they sit, twittering together throughout the whole journey. Some of their prattle penetrates

your newspaper; you cannot help overhearing; and you note how monstrously silly it all sounds. You wonder what satisfaction is to be gained from the exchange of such foolish remarks, such idle questions and idle answers, all with a full accompaniment of nods and smiles and cooings. They would be no worse off if they merely made pleasant noises—bee, bah, boh; or, better still, if they sang together. But the fact is, of course, that actually they are singing together rather than talking. They are happy, and their tongues are lyrical in their happiness; an idea would be a grim intruder; thought is unnecessary, and they have no desire to barter it. They are swimming in a pleasant atmosphere, recognise that they are swimming there together, and merely emphasize the situation by making happy little noises, suggesting confidence and companionship. All this they know themselves, for the recognition of it shines in their faces, from which the sharp, purposeful look has vanished. If they really wished to converse, to obtain some information, to assert a superiority, you would see the difference at once. But they

are at ease, swordsmen of a thousand battles now making a few bright passes at the sun with buttoned foils.

You can see men too engaged in this pastime of atmosphere-creating with words. Catch them immediately after the work is done, glass in hand, stout citizens, men who pay their way and plant their feet firmly on the ground, and you will hear them hurling deep chest notes at one another, hardly nearer to real talk than a baying hound. A feeling of physical and mental well-being and good comradeship is in the air, and this feeling cannot better be expressed than in these loud, cheerful noises that form words but have at once less and more significance than words. They play this game finely among the ruder classes in France, where good citizens gathered over two or three very small glasses can work wonders with a mere *Oui* or *Non*, more explosive though perhaps no more satisfying than the comfortable rumble in our English rural tap-rooms. But men, I think, cannot keep it up as long as women, perhaps because they have less capacity for pure enjoyment or need more variety or are less sensitive to at-

mospheres. It is more than likely that after a few minutes of this genial noise-making, when words are used as maroons, genuine talk will emerge, there will be some exchange of notions, some arguments, and soon the air will be filled with instances and anecdotes and odd scraps of disputation.

Coldly intellectual people condemn what is commonly called dull company (of which I have offered a defence in another place) very unfairly, because they pass judgment before they have taken the trouble to understand what it is they are condemning. That the conversation is dull, almost drivelling, in such companies, let us say at your Uncle James's, when he has the usual set there, the little doctor and his even smaller wife, a silent atom; the two fat men, in tea and coals, with their large, jangling wives; the rector's sister, who will talk of Lugano; the man with the large moustache, who stares and stares; and old Mr. Winterfall, and his niece who works in pewter; that the conversation is uncommonly dull, I repeat, in such companies is beyond cavil; it reveals previously unglimpsed abysses of boredom

and can stretch out yawning Time until every second is a muffled minute gun. The fact is, however, that this conversation is not proffered as talk, in our sense of the word, and therefore should not be judged as such. It is necessary to realise imaginatively what is taking place, and this is what our coldly intellectual friend refuses to do. He should realise that once more it is a matter of living happily in an atmosphere. These people are enjoying the situation in which they find themselves, the mere physical proximity of the other persons in the company, the friendly warmth and comfort, and the feeling, for the moment, of security. Outside there are a million disturbing ideas howling with the wind and beating against the windows with the rain. There, too, prowling in the darkness, are hard words and cold eyes, poverty and disease and death. Let us close the shutters, poke the fire, make all snug within and sit happily together, victors for the time being over all the ills of this life. Such words as we use shall be but extra shutters and curtains and blazing coals and cushions. Not for us the desolate uplands where our intellectual

visitor would have us wander, among the jutting crags of the dogmatist and the sweeping mists of scepticism. So runs the thought in such companies, and it should be met with tenderness rather than scorn. It is death to talk, real talk, and I, for one, have no desire for any prolonged stay in this atmosphere; but those of us who have ventured further, who have said farewell to any feeling of dizzy insecurity among ideas, are uncharitable to shut off our sympathy from those who refuse to stir from the fireside. Something, at least, is present that is necessary where there is to be real talk, namely, a feeling of warm companionship.

The persons at the other end of the scale, miles away from such cosy, chattering dulness, the rigid truth-hunters, the bloodhounds of the idea, are not much nearer to the true business of talking. They have ideas, it is true, but they lack that feeling of warm companionship, and there is among them little play of personalities. There should be in talk a natural expansion, a blossoming, of the personalities engaged in it. Conflict there will inevitably be, but it will be a tournament,

with much unnecessary flourishing of lances and shields, nodding plumes and half-impudent trumpetings, rather than a battle; nobody will be killed; the vanquished will drink with the victors instead of being a cold huddle of corpses; and, indeed, there will be nothing to tell one from the other and no one will rightly know who has prevailed. That is real talk. But these solemn truth-hunters do not expand and blossom. They are there for business. You may see them, their noses to the ground, tracking the truth over leagues of meadow and heath. Or you may see them, after the most perfunctory passes for courtesy's sake, hard at it, one with another, raining down arrows of evidence and clubbing one another with weighty syllogisms. Even when there is no ferocity displayed, its place is merely taken by a kind of chilly politeness that is even further removed from comradeship than a hearty antagonism. Those creatures we meet in philosophical dialogues are clearly not there for talk; the author gives us a ventriloquial entertainment or shows us one man of flesh and blood knocking down six men of straw. When the business on

hand has been despatched, when it has been satisfactorily proved that virtue depends upon knowledge or that matter has no real existence, the thing is done, all the creatures collapse and are promptly tucked away in the property box. Conversations of this kind in actual life are very little nearer to talk. The personages engaged in them do not collapse and cannot be tucked away in a box, but that is only because they are not absolutely perfect philosophical or scientific debaters but chance to be human beings as well.

They have, however, that business on hand which is fatal to genuine talking. They must keep going along the straight road, dare not look over hedge-rows, take a leap into a field, or sail away into the blue. And this is precisely what genuine talkers are for ever doing. Freedom to wander is of the essence of the matter. There must not be something to be despatched in so many sentences. It is not strictly true to say that talk exists for its own sake, for nothing in this world exists for its own sake except a strictly limited number of values (and they, after all, are not in this world): talk exists that there

may be communication between ardent and sensitive spirits, so that personalities may blossom in company. But beyond that it must have no reason for its existence; a hundred and one things may come of it, new monthly reviews and trips to the Carpathians and ruined kingdoms and babies, but these are only indirect products of its activity, its random scattering of seed. In itself it is as near to being completely satisfying as anything in this imperfect world. This does not mean that we never tire of it; we are so made that we tire of anything and everything, but that is our frailty and not the fault of our diversions, least of all that of talking. We are seldom tired of that, not, that is, of the genuine thing, for all the other forms of speech soon pall. Nor, you will have noticed, is there any end to it. You may conclude a discussion, a debate, a symposium, and so forth, for such affairs are only begun to be concluded; they "grow to a point"; you can see in them a size and shape. But genuine talk streams on for ever. You may have to cut it off but you cannot really end it. You have merely had one piece of it, and soon you will return—if

you are wise—for another piece. Talk might be compared to a kind of territory; one can get *into* it and out of it—probably that is why people say they got *into* talk with someone—but there, as it were, it remains all the time. Never do you feel that you have really put an end to it; you have simply moved away from it. Somewhere or other (to return to the earlier metaphor) it is there—streaming on. We have but to search out the right company, and in we plunge again, to find we have a greater kingdom at our command than ever had Prester John.

Between these two extremes, of idle chatter and close debate, talk is to be found. It is not, however, a mere compromise between the two, let us say industrious chatter or debate and water. No, it is a new element in intercourse. There must be present in it both ideas and autobiography. If one of them is entirely absent, the resulting talk will be flavourless, insipid. By ideas I mean, of course, theory-mongering in all its forms, particularly those large generalisations that always make some dons and little critics so angry. It is true that there can be too

many of them in writing, but it is difficult to have too many in talk, and it is equally difficult to have them too large and too loose. Give me, for a companion, the man who every now and then launches, with the ghost of a grin haunting his eager face, a perfectly monstrous generalisation. A pair or trio of talkers that does not set free within the hour at least half a dozen of these huge gaily-coloured balloons of speculative thought is a company that is not making the most of its time. But while there must be ideas, they must not be grappled with too seriously; they must not be hunted down, killed, stuffed and labelled. Nor must they be juggled with too easily. There is a right attitude towards these things; it may be expressed in a soaring eagerness just touched with humour or in a quiet earnestness spiced delicately with irony; and you find it in all the best talkers. Pater, after accusing Coleridge of "an excess of seriousness arising from a misconception of the perfect manner," points out to us how Plato, "a true humanist, holds his theories lightly, glances with a somewhat blithe and naïve inconsequence from one view to another,

not anticipating the burden of importance 'views' will one day have for men." That is the right attitude for philosophical writing; and for talk, the same attitude loosened and lightened, touched with both enthusiasm and humour, is perfect.

The autobiographical element in talk covers all the odd judgments, tastes, whims and prejudices that may be set forth by the talker and gives it his personal colouring; and with them go the occasional instances and scraps of experience. Talk may be made up entirely of this autobiographical matter, but never the best talk. There must be some admixture of ideas, which give the talk form and shape just as the other gives it colour. When the two are mingled, not in distinct slabs side by side, but thoroughly combined so that they could not be separated, we have the talk it is the purpose of this essay to celebrate. It is, of course, a common fault of the old to over-indulge in the autobiographical, though at times this may be so rich and strange that we forgive the grave disproportion. They have long ceased to play with ideas; their opinions have been held so long that they appear, to more youth-

ful minds, to be transformed into whims and prejudices; such ideas as they bring forward seem as personal as a taste in cheese; and therefore all, to us, is autobiographical. Eager to restore the balance, we rush from their company into that of some young theorist who is all ideas and has not yet achieved personality. But when we are for talk we avoid both parties and look for that consummate mingling, for theories coloured by personality, autobiography enriched by ideas, which is the secret of the noblest traffic in words.

You may approach the matter another way by declaring that there are in talk three factors to be considered: one's own self, the other self (or selves) concerned, and everything outside those selves, which we may call the world. All three must have their turn, their place at the board, a fair share of attention. One must do justice to one's self, one's opinions, tastes, whims, experiences, odd fancies. That sounds easy enough, and it is easy enough for most of us, but there are those, the shy, the reticent, who may not necessarily be tongue-tied but who cannot contrive to

adopt themselves as a subject, cannot admit you into the inner secrets of their minds and hearts, who do not find it easy. Frequently they are near to being the salt of the earth, infinite in kindness and long-suffering, but as companions for talk they are faulty. They destroy the proper balance, and they encourage us, their fellow-talkers, to neglect to do what we do not find easy to do in any company. For one must also do justice to the other selves, which must be recognised as having a real existence, the kindred of one's own. And this is certainly not so easy as it sounds. The greater part of our speech is exchanged with what we regard as quaint mechanisms, cunningly shaped and coloured like ourselves but yet merely things that can listen, can be impressed, can answer, that are capable of action, but have no insides and if we prick them do not bleed. We spend not a little of our time (if we are unfortunate we spend most of it) moving among and occasionally addressing property figures, ourselves being no better than property figures to them. But here and there are creatures, not very different externally, who seem to be beings

of another order of creation, for we know that they are actually real people like ourselves. There is something inside them that can be hurt, soothed, touched with delight; they dream, wonder, grow fearful or angry just as we do; their bodies house, their eyes reflect, another self so like our own and yet so fascinatingly different; and all this we know, and even if we would (and it is perhaps the supreme sin to attempt it) we could not turn them into mechanisms, breathing shadows. And it is with these real people, and with them alone, we talk. The other selves have to be recognised or nothing can be exchanged, nothing communicated.

There is still the third factor, namely, everything outside the selves, the world. Talk can go forward without it; and frequently does at first, when the selves are delightedly playing Crusoe and Man Friday. The you-and-me, me-and-you traffic is by no means to be despised. This is the talk of lovers, and with some appropriate accompaniments, moons and music, the bright commerce of eyes, wine and roses in the blood, it can be matchless, unforgettable, a madrigal of a lost May morn-

ing. But, even with lovers, it cloys in time. The moment comes when it degenerates into either cooing or bickering, a passing of sweetmeats or a stab and a thrust. Talk sooner or later demands the presence of the world, that huge football which self tosses to self, that gigantic roast at which there is for ever cut and come again; and then, indeed, there is play, there is dining. You are in it and I am in it, and between us we sack the world, piling up its jewels and fabrics with a mere rapid barter of exclamations, burning whole palaces with a remark, wrestling for cities, marching together over continents, balancing empires on the turn of a phrase. That is talk. There we sit at ease, merely exchanging words, and yet we parade in magnificence, we run, leap, wrestle, we dwindle into maggots crawling under black night, we expand and dilate until our shadows darken the world and we could pluck from their ether red Betelgeux and Aldebaran; and as experience chimes on experience, a thousand little pictures flicker before our eyes, people and cities loom and fade like dreams, we gaze through the windows our

fellow-talkers uncover for us and live intensely in moments of our own past as we recover them, hurrying through a thousand little dramas; and as we warm to the work, we can recast our destiny between some score pulls at a pipe, condemn whole races to the galleys and bathe others in beauty and light, and within the space of ten remarks we can go into the wilderness, receive our commands from Heaven after the first mouthful of wild honey, and return, roaring doom, to the market-place; and then, as idea chases idea, and the hunt is up with Truth mocking from every thicket, the entire cosmos takes shape after shape in our hands, we dizzily build up our own universes and knock down our companions', or together, at last superbly unanimous, we fling in the last few constellations, banish the Devil, sweep humanity from West Ham to Paradise, and bid the eternal choir sound the Amen.

II

AS TALK is so fair and gracious a thing, a diversion that not only permits but encourages the spiritual creature in us to expand, it follows that in such a world as this it has innumerable enemies. There are, to begin with, all the powers of darkness, who delight in huge leaden silences, sharp words of command and interminable monologues, but who flap their leathery wings in anger when they remark us engaged in the fair, frank and soaring exchanges of talk. Well they know, these sons and daughters of Chaos and Black Night, that if this friendly commerce should become universal their occupation would be gone. But the danger, so far, is small if only because there must also be included among the enemies of talk the major portion of the human race. Let us admit at once, otherwise we descend into pessimism, that there is a prospective talker in all of us, that the seed of real

conversation is there; and with a few more centuries of sunshine, with a world neither hissing with lava nor yet a wilderness of glaciers, there is some prospect of whole races of talkers being engendered. By that time, it may be, the crude business of the world will be finished, the last pick and shovel laid aside, all the ledgers duly balanced; the rough wooing of Nature will be at an end and she will smile from her pillows, a happy bride; the world will be measured, mapped, drained, and made instantly accessible to sight and sound; the last vote will have been given, the last shot fired; and then humanity, comfortably housed, clothed and fed, perched on the spoil of the ages, with all past arts and histories and philosophies ready to hand, will settle down to talk. The strong, silent man will long ago have joined his friends, the mastodon and the sabre-toothed tiger, in limbo. The world will have become one huge drawing-room and one huge cavern. The Solar System will be murmurous with the talk, the subtle, many-coloured, delectable words, ascending from the Earth, and it may be that when the Sun finally dwindles into a cold

cinder, men will talk themselves clean through into eternity, thus over-riding the judgment and eluding the malice of dead matter. The talk itself will be so completely engrossing that nobody will notice Doomsday Eve will have come and gone.

But this "rapture of the forward view," admirable for the purposes of rhetoric, must not keep us, stout realists as we are, from recognising the fact that there are among us more enemies than friends of talk. And not only are they to be found here and there and almost everywhere, but they even pop up in the few unexpected places. Thus I do not hesitate to include among the enemies of talk the so-called great talkers. These gentlemen, we are told, sacrificed everything for talk. Tom Moore tells us how he and Rogers "spoke of poor Mackintosh; said he had sacrificed himself to conversation; that he read for it, thought for it, and gave up future fame for it." Such a one, it would seem, should be included among the martyrs rather than among the enemies of our faith. But actually his faith, for which he perished, is not ours. Yet before we hasten to condemn these Coleridges and

Mackintoshes and Macaulays and the rest, who were called great talkers because they published in folio at the dinner-table, we must allow them their moments of triumph. We must acknowledge, too, their services to the spoken word. They showed, at least the best of them showed, what could be done with words and a voice. They banished silence, grunts and guffaws, mere half-hearted remarks, and put in their place bold invasions and massive raids by whole armies of words into the most remote kingdoms of thought and feeling. We cannot read the countless tributes, breathless with admiration, to Coleridge as a talker ("I have heard Coleridge. That man is entitled to speak on till Doomsday . . .") without feeling a thrill ourselves; it would be idle, and worse than idle, to pretend that there are here no services to talk. Whether Wilde was a genuine talker, able to draw out others, or one of these great monologists, I am in no position to decide, but there is a story told of him that seems to me to enshrine his greatest moment, when one's heart goes out to the man. He had been invited to lunch at a country-house in

Yorkshire. As soon as "Mr. Oscar Wilde" was announced, the hunting men assembled there drew away, hiding behind newspapers or turning their backs upon this fat, over-dressed, scented and curled, oily poseur with an unsavoury reputation. Wilde greeted his host and, without appearing to remark the attitude of the company, began to talk. In a few minutes, paper after paper was thrown down, group after group was broken by laughter; the sportsmen gathered round, and there they remained, delighted, until the small hours, completely under the spell of this same fat, unsavoury fellow who went on talking, talking.

So much may be said for the sake of justice. But the faith of these great talkers, I repeat, is not ours. They are not, in truth, great talkers at all but authors too idle to put their folios into print, or orators who mistake the nature of the assembly they address. If they wish to make long speeches, it is their business, as the Americans say, to hire a hall. If they have whole volumes inside them, they should instantly depart in search of pen and paper, so that in time we have what-

ever they wish to say neatly bound and waiting our convenience on a bookshelf. The wise readers who still cherish H. D. Traill's "The New Lucian" will remember the opening of that astonishingly fine dialogue there between Johnson and Coleridge:

> COLERIDGE: Do not go, Dr. Johnson. There are still many subjects I would fain discuss with you. Or are you wearied by our conversation?
>
> JOHNSON: Why, no, sir. I will not deny that I am wearied; but it is not by anything which I can reasonably call conversation. For conversation—if any credit is to be given either to usage or to etymology—implies an interchange of ideas.

The Doctor is our spokesman here. It may be said that he himself was hardly the ideal companion for a talk. But such sins as he had are almost trifling when compared with those of gentlemen who turned what should have been an evening's conversation into a three- or four-hour monologue. To talk for victory, as Johnson frequently did, and to be, as he was,

not over-scrupulous with regard to the means, are faults in a talker, but such a one does at least recognise that his companions have ideas and experiences and voices of their own. It is better to be clubbed with a brutal remark now and again than to be regarded as a gigantic ear and as nothing else.

Johnson's greatest fault was probably not his fierce pugnacity and occasional brutality, in which there was, after all, a certain comic gusto that is the very salt of talk, but his judicial habit of mind, the conclusiveness of his talk. He settled everything too quickly. Boswell or Mrs. Thrale would cast about and then start a subject as if it were a hare in a thicket; one of the company would run this way, to head it off, another would run that way; and then suddenly—bang!—the Doctor's gun would go off and there would be the poor little subject lying dead. In such a decisive judicial presence it was almost impossible to expand. A topic was worried to death in a few minutes. The talk could not move forward like a swiftly flowing stream or soar upward as the personalities involved warmed to the work.

It proceeded in a series of explosions: one, two, three, bang!—silence—one, two, three, bang! That such a massive personality has a value of its own, that it may give us something better than an evening's genuine talk, I am not prepared to deny. But that, after all, is not the point. We should, if we were wise, be ready to sacrifice an evening's talk simply to behold Argive Helen blooming in silence at the other end of the room, to watch Shakespeare handle his quill and assemble his scattered sheets. But as talk is the subject, these comparative values are not our business; everything must be looked at from the angle of talk, and so surveyed and judged Johnson cannot be accepted as an ideal talker. We can only speak, of course, of the figure we meet in Boswell, a man who sat weightily among his juniors and intellectual inferiors, who was expected to sum up every few minutes. Johnson in his younger days was probably neither so acute nor so decisive, neither so wise nor so rich a character, but it is more than likely that being far less judicial and conclusive (though no less dogmatic and pugnacious, but then these are qualities

that do little or no harm to a talker of the right breed) he was a better companion. But to the last, his attitude towards talk, not his actual part in it but his thought and feeling about it, was perfect. His "Sir, we had a good talk" is worth whole volumes in praise of conversation. That strain of melancholy which ran through his character, making him ever aware of the sombre background to this life, of poverty and disease and toil, of the encroaching shadow and dark mystery of Death, left him an intense appreciation of social cheer. Against that sombre background the glowing hearth, the tavern lights, the circle of friendly faces about the table, the cheerful play of words, shone more brightly: there was for a few brief hours in this little lighted space something like heart's ease. Small wonder that so many of his glorious pronouncements, such as "Whoever thinks of going to bed before twelve o'clock is a scoundrel," or "If you are idle be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle," seem stout props for the whole race of talkers. His memory should be a benediction at their every meeting.

It would be a mistake to assume that such interminable talkers as Coleridge were merely plain egoists who knew in their hearts that other people wished for a share in the talk but who were determined to hold the floor themselves. They may have suffered from egoism, but a frustrated genius for authorship, an intense desire to express themselves copiously at once without the labour of writing, will explain them better. Nor can they be accused altogether justly of selfishness, if only because their company more often than not did actually consist of persons who had come expressly to hear them, in short, of an audience. But these are exceptional individuals, of whom there are not more than one or two in half a century. Touching them, we have only touched the very outermost fringe of the enemies of talk. We must be prepared now to face the whole vast array. And here egoism is rampant. There are the whole army corps of selfish monopolists, the retired politicians, the young men fresh from college, the mothers of marvellous children, the successful and self-complacent, the unsuccessful and grievance-

mongering, whose egoistical din makes real conversation impossible. Such remarks as we are allowed to make from time to time are merely stages for new flights—if anything so pitifully prosaic as their babble can be called a flight. They do not visit us but merely choose a fresh backcloth for their soliloquies. It is doubtful if they are really aware that we exist. If they do know that we exist, that we too have something to say and could, if necessary, chatter as long as they can, then so much the worse for them. And it is clear, if we may judge from their efforts, the glitter in their eyes if someone should try to cut in, that many of them do know that they are not moving among shadows but are torturing, for their own good pleasure, fellow-souls. When such persons are not merely infuriating, they are saddening. Consider their efforts, their determination. When I reflect upon the bad authors and artists I have known who have recklessly spent their vital energy holding the floor against all comers in drawing-rooms, and when I remember that a tenth of this energy, this grim determination, expended on the pro-

duction of their books or pictures would have brought about miraculous results, there is a sinking at my heart. A little easy transference would have saved their conversation and equally saved their art: as it is they have contrived to bore me in both. Here, fortunately, they can be summarily dismissed. This floor at least they shall not hold.

Allied to these brutal monopolists, though less crude in their sins, are those unnumbered persons who regard conversation as a mere barter of attention. What they say, in effect, is, If you will listen to me, I will listen to you. Here there is at least some exchange, a square deal, but that is the most that can be said for the arrangement. Such persons must not imagine for a moment that they are talking or that they can even know what talk is. Their company is a hollow mockery. It is with them as if I should pluck off my ear, hand it over to you, lean back in my chair and allow you to jabber into it for a minute or two, and then you should hand it back, pass over your own ear and quietly doze while I do my share of jabbering. It is true that the better sort do

make a pretence of listening with interest; there is an understood make-believe that conversation is really going forward; and you may see them nod their heads, smile and raise their eyebrows, and from time to time they will murmur "Really," and "Quite," and "Surely not," and so on; but all the while, as you may gather from a kind of vacant look in their eyes, they are not really listening, nothing is being taken in, their minds being fully occupied with what they are about to say next. That they should begin by saying, "That reminds me," when nothing you have said could possibly have reminded them, instead of merely exclaiming, "You've had two minutes. My turn now," is part of the make-believe, which is fully understood by all but the very young and the pathetically simple, who frequently imagine that this pretence of talk is real and may be seen squeezing out their hearts before these incurious eyes.

Nothing could better illustrate the fantastic illogicality of common human nature than its passion for this pretence of talk. I can understand the solitary, who has come to the conclusion that company

is more bother than it is worth, who prefers to pace for ever the circle of his own mind rather than risk the annoyances, the irritation, the heart-breaks that may follow companionship. I can understand, even better, those who wish to explore other minds and to have their own explored, who desire to expand in company with other saved or lost souls, who would join hands with a kindred spirit and turn the world over and over, and knowing that all this is possible in talk, cannot be kept from it. But merely to want to play at talk, to go into company and yet still be a solitary, to find some satisfaction in addressing a listener who, you know in your heart, is not really listening at all, in short, to go through all the formalities sometimes attendant upon communication with a fellow-creature and yet to wave aside the vital thing itself—this is to be the regular patron of a Barmecide restaurant. It is a kind of lazy cheating, in which, however, each person, though he thinks he is cheating the other by exchanging merely the appearance of interest for what he takes to be real interest, is really cheating himself. He knows in his heart

that what he is receiving in exchange is also nothing but an appearance of interest, that he is not really getting something for nothing but nothing for nothing, and yet he will persevere with the elaborate make-believe and even contrive to wring some satisfaction out of it. Yet it is clear that interest in persons should be mutual or it is worthless. It is the most shadowy play of vanity to wish to arouse the interest of people in whom we are not prepared to interest ourselves. We are better occupied strutting the arena of our day-dreams. This odd fashion of pretended communication, in which each party is ready to give out something but not to take in anything, each being entirely self-absorbed, with the resulting talk nothing better than the noise of two drums being beaten side by side, this time-old game has been meat and drink to the comic writers since they first laughed over their papyrus. They will show us two characters who presumably meet to exchange ideas and experiences but only succeed in prattling quite independently of one another, as if they should imagine they are walking together and are in

reality moving in two different worlds. Sterne made great play with this in his account of the Shandy family, who follow their own noses in talk and never succeed in establishing any real intellectual communication between themselves. Much of Sterne's fun proceeds from these intellectual cross-purposes. Yet we have only to lose a little of our detachment, to move only a little away from thought and nearer to feeling, to find something infinitely saddening in this familiar comic situation. It suddenly changes, if we move a step or so and look again, from comic egoism to tragic isolation. The two nodding puppets have disappeared, and in their place we see two wistful spirits with their incommunicable dreams. Indeed, it is one of those truly double-faced situations that will suit our mood and answer "Aye" to either the call of comedy or tragedy, being tragi-comic like the very stuff of life. This difficulty of real communication is one of the secrets of Tchekhov's masterpiece, "The Cherry Orchard," which some play-goers see as a comedy, others as a tragedy, and others again, the wisest, as a tragi-com-

edy, something steeped in tender irony. Because its personages, isolated, speaking out of their secret dreams, will not really communicate with one another, they are comic; because they cannot, they are equally tragic. It is frequently described, superficially, as a satirical picture of unfortunates who can do nothing but talk; but, in truth, in our sense of the word, that is just what these people cannot do. There is practically no real talk in the play, but only so many sad, impudent or wistful soliloquies. Talk, as we understand it, would have let in a little air and honest daylight, and all things there would have moved to a brisker tune.

That your talker must be sensitive goes without saying. Nothing can be done with the stupid. There are some people whose presence dries up the very springs of talk. Whatever subject they touch immediately sheds its wings and brightness, and falls, a leaden lump, to the ground. They carry with them an awful miasma of dulness against which the most determined talker cannot prevail. In their company the world seems bleached and withered; one heavy look from their dull, protrud-

ing eyes, one slow wave of the hand, and all the gay and lovely things, the high-fantastical, are banished; and we go limping across leagues of dreary steppes. We are told by certain masters of demonology, that the Court of Hell has its ambassadors and minor representatives on earth, that more than one apparently respectable quiet citizen is in reality an emissary from the darkness. It may well be that these so-called stupid persons who blight our talk are really engaged in the work Hell sent them to do, that they are not of our own kind at all but devils artfully disguised, who are probably in the act of preparing their reports ("Six people in Bayswater bored and left less in love with existence," and so forth) while we are yawning and stealing glances at our watches. The absence of talk, the moment when the world seems a poor thing and life an incredibly dreary round, are Hell's opportunity, when it needs but a whisper from Belial or Beelzebub to set us trampling down every fine thought and charitable impulse, to plunge us into all manner of cruelties. Fortunately, as soon as we suspect that some of the stupid are

not what they seem, their power is gone. We see them against black night and the eternal flames. We hear in their even tones the despairing cry of Lucifer. They are themselves high-fantastical, though infernally so, and at the first sight of their piquant disguise all boredom vanishes. Thus once again, we observe, the powers of Hell, so infinite in energy and resource, have over-reached themselves.

There are people here and there, however, who are actually too sensitive to be talkers and, indeed, might be included among the enemies of talk. With them, you have to be too careful where you tread. Their minds are crowded with hallowed sanctuaries, pitfalls and powder magazines. The talk cannot wander where it will. This, that, and the other subject must be avoided at all costs. You make a certain remark to them, the conversation having arrived at the point where that remark might reasonably be made, and to your astonishment they suddenly fly into a rage or give you a cold stare, all friendliness having died out of their faces, and markedly change the subject. These are the persons who bring

crow's-feet to the faces of conscientious hostesses. They need tact. You must remember, in their presence, not to mention suicides or religious mania or divorces or drunkenness. Now tact is one of those things that make a truly civilised social life possible. I have admired the exercise of it for years; admired, I must confess, at some distance, as I have little or none of it myself. To see a clever hostess, with the merest flick or two of her paddle, guide the frail bark of conversation between the sunken rock here and the rapids there, warms my heart, and if she does it prettily, as she so frequently does, with just the very faintest suspicion of a moue as a delightful conspirator's signal to those in the know, then no matter how old and ugly she may be, though she should be my publisher's grandmother, my heart is at her feet and I am ready, over the coffee, to make a declaration. Tactless I may be, but it shall not be said that I cannot appreciate its delicate manœuvring, its kindly civilised grace. But tact and talk cannot exist together. If you are being merely tactful, then you are not talking. The persons who demand

tact, as the over-sensitive do, should be shown it, but they cannot expect talk as well. Talk is for more hardy creatures who only ask that they may be allowed to go where they will, who refuse to be steered clear from this and herded away from that, who are prepared to discuss for hours, if necessary, the thing that broke Aunt Sophy's heart or ruined Uncle Jim. Whoever makes reservations, nails up Danger notices, stands before hallowed chambers, may have the warmest heart and the finest intelligence but is not tough enough for talk, and must be included, though perhaps reluctantly, among its enemies. The tale of these is a long and formidable one; first the monopolists; then the barterers of attention; then the stupid; and, finally, the over-sensitive; we begin to wonder how talk contrives to come into existence at all. The situation, however, is not so bad as this survey of the hostile camp would seem to suggest. Consider, if you have the stomach for it, the microbes, the swarming bacteria, that prey upon us, and it will seem a miracle that we should contrive to live at all, let alone that we should have opportunity to

boast and strut and wage wars. So, too, talk lives in spite of its innumerable enemies, and it does not merely exist as a poor thin shoot, but here and there, as you (I trust) and I know to our delight, it blossoms gigantically so that the very moon and stars seem tangled in its leafage.

III

WHEN Dr. Johnson heard that the Fellows of some Oxford colleges had excluded the students from their Common Rooms, he declared: "They are in the right, Sir; there can be no real conversation, no fair exertion of mind amongst them, if the young men are by; for a man who has a character does not choose to stake it in their presence." Here, it seems to me, Johnson was both right and wrong. He was right in holding that the difference in status between the Fellows and the students was a barrier in the way of real conversation. He was wrong in supposing, as he always did suppose, that real conversation is a contest, a duel rather than a duet, an affair in which a man has to stake his character. Good talk may include an occasional gladiatorial combat of the kind Johnson loved, but to imagine it is composed of nothing else is to mistake its nature. If there is to be noth-

ing but heated debate, talking for victory on all sides, no doubt some good things will be struck out, the wit will be given a cutting edge, and the old fighting animal in us will gleefully be up and smiting, but we shall never come near the fine flower of talk. The persons engaged in it will contract, for purposes of defence and offence, and not expand, and a natural expansion of the mind, a blossoming of personalities in communication, is of the very essence of talk. Seeing himself talking for victory, a man will shut off one half his mind, the very part he should express, that which contains so many secret hopes and fears, so many wistful guesses at truth, so many odd fancies, for fear of suffering defeat in these mysterious border-lands, of being ambushed on one of its strange roads. He will keep to the plain daylight and dogmatic half, as Johnson did, and thereby struck down so many antagonists, though we have glimpses of that other half of his mind, shadowy with fear and pity and melancholy shapes, and cannot but regret that his view of talk led him to say farewell to it in company. If conversation is to be nothing but contest, then whether

"the young men are by" or not, a man will not risk much where there is not only a lack of sympathy but a plain antagonism; whereas in real talk, if it is to mean anything, all should be risked.

No, Johnson's reason was wrong, but his statement, that the mixed assembly of tutors and taught was no place for real conversation, was nothing less than the truth. Genuine talk demands a rough equality between the persons engaged in it. Any marked difference immediately does away with the natural easy flow of discourse; not only is the inferior less than himself, something of a nodding, smiling image, but so is the superior, who is also compelled to put by his natural self and to act a part; so that no unfolding of minds, no budding and blossoming of personalities, is possible. That which takes the place of talk may be very valuable indeed, as we may see from the exchanges between Johnson and Boswell, a notably unequal pair, but here it is the vain little Boswell the man and the crafty Boswell the biographical artist who are being satisfied, and not Boswell the talker, who has to wait until Johnson is out of

the way. Whether we act the inferior or the superior, the aged mentor or the young pupil, the condescending chief or the earnest assistant, we are still playing a part, one of our innumerable parts, and there can be no talk unless we are able to shed our disguises, our clothes of necessity and custom, and to allow our minds to sport naked on the shores of Truth. And of these unequal exchanges, the commonest is that between the aged and their juniors. That it is good for us to be in the company of the old, as Stevenson affirmed in his essay, there can be no doubt. There we get both entertainment and discipline in conversation, but what we do not get is that genuine exercise which is talk. To be completely ourselves with the aged, to annul the years between us with a grin, would be merely an impertinence, and out of that there will come no talk. There is nothing for it but to put forward a figure representing us in the conversation, and while we retire to the back of our minds, there to take what sustenance we can out of the matter, part amused, part pitiful, this figure can offer wide eyes and ears to the familiar anecdotes and gravely

salute, in passing, notions that we have pelted for years. Being myself still young, as the almost inhuman solemnity of this essay would suggest, I cannot speak for the old and their part in the conversation, but I do not doubt that it is equally unnatural, that they too retire to be part amused, part pitiful. Talk cannot be born of such a mingling of histrionics and self-communion.

Stevenson himself, who would elbow us into the company of the old, only proves our point when he remarks: "The old appear in conversation in two characters: the critically silent and the garrulous anecdotic." Here, it is plain, there can be no gay and swelling exchanges, no mutual enfranchising. That critical silence of theirs must clearly turn us into monologists (for someone must say something), and not even easy and expansive monologists, with our vanity, plumed and beribboned, screeching at the gates of decency and finally let loose in its startled highways, but narrowed, apologetic, wary-eyed monologists, laying every shoddy sentence on the counter with a tremulous glance at a hoary lifted eyebrow that

might fall at any moment and send us scurrying. The alternative, the old who appear as the garrulous anecdotic, brings us no nearer genuine talk. It merely transforms us into an audience, assisting, no doubt, at a delightful entertainment, but still an audience, with no part but to gape and grin and clap our hands. So long as we do that, our minds may be sunning themselves on the beach at Tahiti and it will not make a pin's difference. We may possibly prefer an entertainment of this kind to the more vigorous and fruitful diversion of talk; but the two things must not be confused. Actually a wise man (though he will not reject the anecdotes) will not give them the preference, for even if good talk were no more valuable (and it is), it is certainly less common and therefore should be accepted whenever it is offered. And as the anecdotic has been the ruin of many who might otherwise have been good talkers, men with no weight of years and pressure of memories to excuse them, this manner deserves a word to itself.

Anecdotes are the condiments in talk. It can do without them, just as your

summer breakfast table with its assembled fruits, cereals and cream, brown bread and honey needs no help from the cruet. The intimate exchanges, the earnest me-and-you, of lovers and newly-discovered friends can go forward without any assistance from anecdote. Talk of this kind, in which the mind and heart are eagerly opened, does not need to be salted. But the most general forms of talk are apt to be either flat or rather grim without some seasoning of anecdote. The stories themselves should be welcome for their own sake, should be good enough to stand by themselves if necessary, but at the same time they should be illustrative, apt and pointed, coming in easily to carry the talk onward. They must not be dragged in by the scruff of the neck and be allowed to divert the whole course of the conversation. Above all, except in moments of social crisis, when it is better to send an ornament crashing into the fireplace than to submit a moment longer to the awful silence, we must avoid the deliberate comic story, reminiscent of gentlemen who entertain at the piano, the set piece in anecdote. Even when you

are faced with a crisis and it is evident that something must be done, it is as well to consider whether it would not be better to tip the coal-scuttle on to the Persian rug or to knock over a rose-bowl or two, rather than to inflict upon the company your ten minutes' misery of the Irishman who lost his way or the Jew who went to the theatre. One set piece and—unless the company is unusually strong-minded —all chances of real talk are lost for the night, which is now dedicated to vaudeville.

Not a few men who have reputations as good talkers are not really talkers at all. They are merely raconteurs, first cousins to professional entertainers. Their conversation is nothing but a string of anecdotes, and however good such anecdotes may be they cannot transform patter into talk and a mere audience into intimate and self-revealing companions. Many diplomats, legal men, doctors and journalists are subject to this conversational vice of anecdote-mongering, and though they may be the best fellows in the world, witty, agreeable, fathoms deep in rich experience, they offer us only the shadow

of talk. The very wealth of their experience tempts them to pile instance upon instance until the idea itself, the thing to be proved, is lost and totally forgotten. There is, indeed, every excuse for such professional men falling into anecdotage. Not only is their experience wider than most, but it is apt to be of a different kind. Their duties have taken them behind the scenes in this life, where you and I have never set foot, and while their professional etiquette keeps them silent for some time, a thousand secrets hidden behind their bland faces, they cannot be silent for ever and must unbosom themselves to someone. Our very innocence and ignorance cries "Open Sesame!" to them, and, unbuttoned and at ease, with a clear fire and some tobacco and a delightful off-duty feeling, a gaping innocent at their side, small wonder that they should overwhelm us with stories. Up come the trawling nets from the vast sea of memory, and our decks are heaped with all manner of strange fish. We thought that such a one did so-and-so, did we, that it was always the habit of gentlemen to do this and ladies to do that. Well, then, we are

precious innocents, bless us, who know nothing of the world, and they will show us what sort of a world this is—and so the anecdotes come pouring out.

My own acquaintance among these gentlemen has been chiefly among the journalists, than who it would be hard to find better company. When I remember the drinks I have had that I did not want (particularly when I have gone on mechanically drinking apéritifs until the lunch hour, for which I have been preparing, has passed unnoticed and faded away), the appointments I have been compelled to miss, the work I have left undone, all under the spell of their talk, I would be a lying churl to deny its enchantments. With what gusto, while pipes were filled and smoked away and filled again, and the little shining fleet of glasses made innumerable journeys from the bar to the table, these adventurers of Fleet Street, now free to tell the truth, to bring out so many forbidden epigrams, passed from one public name to another, from one great event to the next, rending and consuming with a few bright words and a pointed pipe so many drab tissues of lies that they

themselves (or at least the more unfortunate of them) had once been compelled to weave. One has no need to be a mere moonstruck provincial, as I once was, and am yet at heart, to be enchanted in such company. Yet reflecting on the talk of many of them, their string of revealing anecdotes, delivered half-bitterly, half-humorously, I realise now that it was far from being the best kind of talk, and, indeed, it is often perilous stuff for youth to handle. It is the expression of a false attitude towards things. The newspaper man errs in imagining that his behind-the-scenes information, his acquaintance with the real reason why the Ministry came to an end, why Smith left the country and Miss Jones retired from the stage, is a real knowledge of life. It is merely a knowledge of the truths that newspapers suppress, of the life they represent and misrepresent, and it is very little closer to the reality of things than the mental picture of the world made by the butcher or the baker. By its very nature, being the reverse side of the medal, a "showing up," it offers opportunities for cheap cynicism, and is very young-

mannish at heart. Indeed, there is in many of these fellows an ambitious boy who, as time has flown, has been compelled to rid himself of his ambitions but has remained a boy, consoling himself by startling the innocents, by reporting vividly but a trifle bitterly on a world that is not the world he once moved in, nor, as he must sometimes suspect in his heart, the real world at all. Unknowingly they make their listeners pay for the sonnets and novels and plays they meant to write but somehow have never found time and energy even to begin.

Stevenson in his essay, while complimenting women, or at least the best of them, on the quality of their conversation, suggests that there can be no real talk between the sexes. "The desire to please," he remarks, "to shine with a certain softness of lustre and to draw a fascinating picture of oneself, banishes from conversation all that is sterling and most of what is humorous. As soon as a strong current of mutual admiration begins to flow, the human interest triumphs entirely over the intellectual, and the commerce of words, consciously or not, becomes secondary to

the commercing of eyes. But even where this ridiculous danger is avoided, and a man and woman converse equally and honestly, something in their nature or their education falsifies the strain." He goes on, in a very sprightly passage, to point out that woman will have nothing to do with those "logical Aunt Sallies" beloved of argumentative males. But throughout he is narrowing talk down to debate, not solemn debate but eager, pugnacious, humorous and fanciful argument, but still debate, which is no doubt found at its best in a masculine company. There is more in talk than this, however, and that is why I cannot agree with the view that there cannot be real talk between the sexes. Here at least is one melancholy conclusion not confirmed by our experience. If sex is uppermost, as it plainly is where there is that "commercing of eyes," then a man and woman are not likely to find themselves engaged in anything that can be called real talk. Their words are at the mercy of their drumming blood, their pounding heart-throbs, and swinging dizzily as they are between misery and ecstasy, they would

be better either silent or singing. Even when they are only half-way along this strange road, let them be excitedly aware of the manhood and womanhood in one another, let some distant hymn to Aphrodite accompany every look and gesture, then their talk will only be good considered as a kind of singing. Everything said will seem to them tremendously significant—never did words shine so brightly, and never did they explain themselves so well—but this is nothing but the lovely hocus-pocus of the old enchantment, which reddens every rose and adds lustre to the dimmest star. Sober listeners —and most of us have been compelled to act the part at some time or other when these Tristans and Iseults have been quaffing their philtres—can only report that the talk has been trumpery, a mere mooing and cooing.

But let a man and woman have some knowledge of one another, let them be lovers whose passion is stilled for a while or old friends whose hearts are engaged elsewhere, and some very good talk indeed can pass between them. It will be different from the talk of persons of

the same sex. Thus it will not have the eager and humorous pugnacity and the broad sweep of talk between men. (Clearly I can say nothing of talk between women.) It will be different, but that does not mean it will be inferior and not compensate us for what we miss in it. But one condition of such talk is that sex must be relegated to the background. It will not stay there, but it is essential that an effort must be made to put it there and keep it there. The man and the woman must be present as individualities, any difference between them being a strictly personal and not a sexual difference. They will then discover, if they did not know it before, how alike the sexes are, once their talk has dug below the level of polite chatter and they are regarding the world and their experience together and not merely flirting. Secure in this discovery, they will then go forward and make another one, for at some point in the talk they must inevitably discover how unlike the sexes are. Thus over and above the play of personalities, which still remains the most important matter, you have these discoveries of likeness and unlikeness,

infinitely entertaining and revealing to the happy talkers. This double play, first of personality and then of sex, is what gives intelligent talk between men and women its curious piquancy, amply compensating us for what it may possibly lack in force and scope. A man and a woman go forward in conversation, exploring the world, turning over their experiences together, doubting this and settling that, and as answer follows question, as instance is capped by instance, each is surprised and delighted to find how the other can follow every twist and turn of the thought and respond to every feeling; but then, suddenly, there appears a rift in the little patch of ground between them, and within the space of two or three remarks it has widened and deepened into a chasm and they find themselves calling feebly through the mist. A single remark, a wondering question, a staring reply, and they are worlds away from one another, feeling as if their close companion of a moment or so before had suddenly been transformed into a being from another planet.

It has been said that there is in all

friendship between the sexes, no matter how cool it may appear, a faint erotic element, the ghost of a flirtation. There is some truth in this, for in good talk between a man and a woman, not too widely separated in years and not owning close kinship, there will be found a faint undercurrent of excitement not present when only one sex is involved. There is nothing so intoxicating in all conversations between men (or, I imagine, between women) as the discovery of close intellectual sympathies in talk between a man and a woman. To a person with an alert mind, the mere commerce of eyes—though it cannot be disputed that eyes play their part—is nothing compared with this discovery. Probably there is no talk between men and women better than that between a pair who are not in love, have no intention of falling in love, but yet who *might* fall in love, who know one another well but are yet aware of the fact that each has further reserves not yet explored. It might be said that wedded lovers are even more happily situated. And so they are, as all-round human beings, but not strictly as talkers, for time will have brought them so

close to one another, they will be so intertwined, that they are almost beyond talk as we understand it. A word or two, a look, a gesture, from one of them and the other will understand. Talk demands that people should begin, as it were, at least at some distance from one another, that there should be some doors still to unlock. Marriage is partly the unlocking of those doors, and it sets out on its happiest and most prosperous voyages when it is launched on floods of talk.

Because the scope of talk between the sexes is limited in certain directions (an innocent and happy Rabelaisian exchange is impossible between the sexes, whose combined muck-raking is a very different, more sinister affair), it does not follow that it is more limited as a whole than the talk of one sex. Between them, a man and a woman command a large range of experience, each having one sphere that the other knows nothing of, as well as what they may share in common. Moreover, once men and women have passed the stage of merely "showing off," of fishing for compliments, of idle gallantry, and have come to deal honestly and frankly

with one another, they are apt to be less reserved than they are in talk with their own sex. Feeling in some odd way that their hearers of the opposite sex are more sympathetic than those of their own, they will take more risks, risks of being misunderstood, of being condemned. They will not hesitate to bring out all manner of little odd thoughts and feelings, strange weaknesses, ludicrous fears and whimsical vanities, that they have kept hidden even from confidants of their own sex. I do not say that talk is made up of an exchange of such things, but they play their part, and there cannot be complete frankness if they are not to be mentioned. Even though there may not have been any emotional passages between a man and woman, nothing but ordinary friendship, there creeps into their attitude towards one another a certain hint of tenderness, each catching a glimpse of the child in the other, and it is probably this tenderness, sensed in the atmosphere even if not openly recognised, that makes the more ludicrous or shameful little pieces of confession easier to the talker. A bleak winter's afternoon, a bright hearth, a tea

tray, and the familiar smiling face opposite (masculine or feminine, according to your own sex, reader), and how many odd little things, never told before, have been rummaged out of the queer corners of our minds, all to be fitted into the enchanting mosaic of the talk.

Men frequently complain that women's conversation is too personal. They cannot, it is said, deal with abstractions at all or keep to the universal and set the particular on one side, or detach themselves from their immediate personal concerns to be impartial judges of a question. They have no faith in the disinterested philosophic mind, but are for ever searching for hidden motives. A conversation between two very feminine women is a kind of fantastic combat, for under cover of their apparently bright prattle, their nods and becks and smiles, they are dealing thrust after thrust. Every remark, no matter how it may be glossed with sweet sympathy, is really deadly. A listening male would hear only polite chatter and would wonder what amusement there could be in such prattling, but the combatants themselves and any feminine

hearers on hand can follow every move of this conversational chess, knowing as they do all the rules of the game. Two men, in the angry heat of an argument, bellowing insults to one another are not launching such wounding blows as are such smiling females, who, after years of this quaint strife, are incapable of taking a remark at its face value. Satirical women novelists have made great capital out of this habit of innuendo, as you may see in Jane Austen, whose more unpleasant female characters are all mistresses of it. So runs the indictment against women's conversation, and we must admit there is some truth contained in it, though it touches the better kind of women only lightly now. The further we get from the harem the more open and honest becomes women's talk.

But even the best of them remain more personal in their interests and less concerned with abstractions than men on the same level of intelligence and culture. While you are briskly and happily generalising, making judgments on this and that, and forgetting for the time being yourself and all your concerns, they are brooding

over the particular and personal application and are wondering what hidden motive, what secret desire, what stifled memory of joy or hurt, are there prompting your thought. But this habit of mind in woman does not spoil talk; on the contrary it improves it, restoring the balance. She is only doing what the modern schools of psychology are doing. It is the habit of men to be over-confident in their impartiality, to believe that they are god-like intellects, detached from desires and hopes and fears and disturbing memories, generalising and delivering judgment in a serene mid-air. To be reminded of what lies behind, now and then, will do them more good than harm. This is what the modern psychologist does, but too often he shatters the illusion of impersonal judgment with a kick and a triumphant bray, like the ass he so frequently is, whereas woman does it, and has done it these many centuries, with one waggle of her little forefinger and one gleam of her eyes, like the wise and witty and tender companion she is. Here, then, is a third kind of play you may have in talk between the sexes, the duel and duet

of impersonal and personal interests, making in the end for balance and sanity and, in the progress of the talk, adding to its piquancy. Talk of this quality between the sexes, with all its happy interplay, is probably rare enough in life: it is even more rare, strangely enough considering the novelist's opportunities, in fiction. Jane Austen could have given us it if her men and women had been more at ease with one another and been less limited in their subjects and the treatment of those subjects. Meredith comes near to it, but his people are too anxious to sparkle and not sufficiently concerned with sincerity for his talk, glorious as it is, to reach perfection. If Vernon Whitford (now married to Clara Middleton and free of his shyness and stiffness) could spend a long cosy afternoon with Elizabeth Bennet (now Mrs. Darcy, and ready to discuss anything), then we should have talk indeed. As it is, in this matter of talk between men and women, literature is but the clumsy twisted shadow of life, and, unless we have been sadly unfortunate, we would rather turn to our

memories than to our books for those examples of talk that gave to a few hours by the fire a strange significance, as if time had rushed by for ever and we were already at ease in eternity.

IV

AMONG the innumerable divisions of mankind, there might very well be one that set apart the talkers and the silent. This is a division that will hold as well as any other. It is not a matter of how many words are expended, the actual clacking of the tongue, but of two distinctly opposed attitudes towards talk. Those of us who assemble in the talking division believe wholeheartedly in the graces and virtues, the admirable uses of talk. For us, "bright is the ring of words." We may be sceptical as to the value of formal conference and debate; we may have laughed and cried at the solemn futility of argument; but nevertheless we delight in talk and put our trust in it. To us words are, in the last resort, a means of escape, of communication, and not simply a snare, a lovely but cruel entanglement of briars about men's feet. Just as man is the tool-making animal, the animal

that cooks, the political animal, so too he is to us the talking animal, the creature that by means of an exchange of words can bring himself to some degree of happiness and wisdom. In spite of the sneers of so many sages, themselves copious and determined talkers, we hold that man is rarely so innocently and fruitfully employed as he is when engaged in genuine talk, unburdening his heart and mind and hearing his fellows unburden theirs. Increased opportunities for talk, an added fluency and sincerity and sensitiveness in the talk itself, are to us no small part of what civilisation means. As mankind advances, so there rises, a shining tide, the flood of talk. Trusting it as we do, we have no desire to limit its scope, to turn the key upon so many hallowed chambers. Nothing, we believe, is too sacred to be talked about, at the right time and with the right company. And so long as this is our attitude, though we may set no tables in a roar, draw out no man's secret dream with a sentence or two, speak only haltingly, we belong to the race of talkers.

Opposed to us, throughout the long

length of the world and in all ages, is that other division of mankind, the company of the silent, in whose hearts, though they may chatter daylong, is barbaric silence, the dumb spell of the desert and the jungle. Behind them they have the proverb-makers, and on the banners that float above their soundless ranks is inscribed "Silence is golden." Words they must use, just as they must use their country's greasy coinage, but they have no love of them. Speech is to them a danger, a sinister device for hampering and entangling men, so that they feel that all may be understood so long as nothing is said. Only in silence can mind reach out to mind and the heart be known. In the bartering of words their personalities do not expand but contract; something lovely has been distorted, something enchanting lost for ever, where there has been speech; and they have seen pageant after pageant of thought and feeling dwindle into a dusty rabble when it has been defiled through the narrow gateway of a phrase. They have places set apart, fenced off from all speech, many things it would be sheer

blasphemy to discuss. They view the talkers, for ever casting up their secret accounts in public, stripping themselves naked before the first gleam of sympathy, with mingled fear and contempt, and do not hesitate to spread libels on the talker that become in time commonplaces of proverbial wisdom. Take up your dictionary of proverbs and quotations, turning to the passage on talk and talkers, and you will find it filled with such libels, the startled glances, the winces and malicious shrugs of the silent.

It is not possible for me, or any other member of the opposing company of talkers, fully to understand the attitude of the silent, and they themselves will never be able to explain it properly, to convince us of the futility of speech by means of speech. This lights up the weakness of their belief, for they must take to words in order to show us their contempt for them, just as Carlyle had to write thirty-four volumes to preach the gospel of silence. But there they are, these speech-haters at heart, and it is likely that they will remain with us, for these two types would seem to be eternal, like the Tory

and the Radical. In a single family, some will be of the talkers, and others of the silent, and it is doubtful if they ever come to understand one another. This division is only yet another explanation why we men and women cannot agree. Notwithstanding all the theories of mating by opposites, I suspect that the talkers and the silent do not intermarry successfully, or even form close friendships. And by the talkers and the silent, I mean, of course, not simply noisy people and quiet people (who might belong to either category), but persons with these fundamentally opposed attitudes of mind towards talk. They cannot, in the last resort, understand one another, and, if they are married, must inevitably find one another exasperating beyond endurance at every crisis. We who are talkers believe that anything can be talked out, which does not mean that a solemn binding conclusion can be arrived at after a sustained debate, but that anything is better for being the subject of talk, and that the talkers themselves, though not necessarily any wiser, are happier and healthier for the talk. Some sweet wind

has blown through mind and heart. We cannot help feeling that the silent are in danger of poisoning themselves, gathering drop after drop of bitterness, brooding over wrongs, without any explosive rush of words to let in daylight, until something inside is all twisted and diseased. There is too often about them a not too happy or healthy pride, setting its heavy seal upon the tongue.

We might overwhelm them with examples of what talk can do, the solid good that outweighs all its odd pranks, but it would be futile, particularly as talk in our sense of the term is not really one of those things that are good as means to an end but a thing supremely good in itself. We who enjoy it do not need to justify its existence and our pleasure in it by means of any tangle of references to the rest of life: it shines before us, as solidly good and satisfying as the morning sun. It affords such ample play to our personalities (and it is by this full play that you judge its quality) that when we are engaged in it, we are completely satisfied and do not see it, as we do so many of our activities, as a mere stepping-stone to some other

thing. The hours it takes are filled up to the brim. There is for the time being no part of ourselves, as it were, left over; we are completely ourselves, and every succeeding moment finds us blossoming. Our companions blossom and expand with us, so that we know them as we never knew them before. Our minds, in their flashing likeness and unlikeness, perform a kind of dance that makes all other dances seem nothing but the capering of beasts. And with talk of the best kind, you can, in Stevenson's phrase, "pass days in an enchanted country of the mind." You are not, as barbarians and stupid people seem to imagine, living far below your proper level in talk, accepting a mere shadow of life, but, on the contrary, are soaring away in the very blue of human existence. Never, except in rare moments of intoxication, do you feel further away from the beasts that perish or closer to divinity.

Though there is something like intoxication in the best talk, there is no sad waking from it. It brings no morning cluttered and dreary with cold ashes and empty bottles. There is, it is true, after

a most mounting and heady talk, when the imagination has poured out its shapes and colours and a dozen ruined Eldorados have been left far behind, when two minds have kept pace through the dizziest flights, a moment when all is done that shows you yourself as a body anchored to a chair and your companion as another inert body and all that has passed between you as so many mouthfuls of air, a moment coming like the cold breath of the night outside a theatre. Everything you had forgotten, the room you are in, the date of the year, your address and business, the morrow's routine, and so on, suddenly reasserts itself in your chilled and shrinking consciousness. The silence that follows then is the very soul of irony. But there is nothing here of the shattering awakening that waits upon our periods of intoxication, and this moment of cool irony, which a genuinely philosophic mind can enjoy, is the worst that talk can do. Of all our pleasures, it exacts the least and gives the most.

Some times and places are better for talk than others, but given a certain amount of warmth, comfort and quiet, any

time and place will serve, two in the afternoon or three in the morning, in bed or up in a balloon. There must, however, be a hatred of talk in the soul of modern life, for conditions are becoming less and less favourable to it, little though it asks. Thus, in the old days the traveller had great opportunities for conversation, as you may see in the old novels. The leisurely jogging coach was almost an ideal setting for a rambling talk, and the train that supplanted it, giving us more comfort but also more noise, is by no means to be despised. But motor cars and aeroplanes are quite impossible, allowing nothing but a grim frozen silence occasionally shattered by a bellowed remark. Their appearance marks the decline of conversation and the rise of a mechanically-minded generation, with its drooping cigarette and muttered monosyllables, that does not know how to talk. And everywhere there is more hustle and bustle and noise, cars and 'buses and jazz and gramophones and loud speakers and sirens and what not, creating an atmosphere in which it is difficult for talk to exist. Yet there are odd com-

pensations here and there among our new things. Thus, in our cities, where quiet streets and taverns are increasingly difficult to find, we now have the large picture theatre, open from lunch time onwards, and the large picture theatre is an excellent place in which to talk during the hours when it is only sparsely filled. You slip in out of the mud and bustle of the street some winter's afternoon, and there in that dim warm interior, a kind of huge magic cave lit with misty emeralds and amethysts, with its curious sensuous atmosphere, you can talk for hours, fantastically against a background of music and posturing shadows on a screen. A humanist philosopher could want nothing better.

Unwithered and never to grow stale, good talk is the Cleopatra of our diversions, pointing to innumerable Antonies who have wrecked their worlds for her sake. It would be idle to say, in the face of these Antonies, that talk has never been any man's ruin, that no man has ever turned this diversion into a drug. Yet it is clear that such talkers have been the victims of some flaw in the will, some har-

assing secret dream that made them reluctant ever to leave the enchanted countries of talk. And it is easy, by dwelling overmuch on the familiar antitheses of promise and performance, word and deed, talk and action, to forget that a promise is a performance, a word a deed, and talk itself a form of action. Indeed, it can be one of the highest forms of action, inasmuch as it may demand that the full weight of the talker's personality be brought into play. And certainly, as we have seen, it can be one of the most engrossing of our activities. Our pleasure in it increases with age. Harvest over, and autumnal years, touched with mist and a faint chill, descending upon us, what better diversion could there be than talk? There is a charm in reverie, particularly for the old, groping back through dark corridors of the mind to lost sunshine and vanished faces, but it provides no real escape for the self and, like all egotistical things, it moves uneasily on the borders of melancholy and despair. But in talk the old may find all the charm of reverie, the panorama of memory being constantly unrolled, and with it too an escape from the

closed circle of self, open country by way of contact with another mind.

I have said that talk is completely satisfying, but that is not strictly true. Talk would be completely satisfying if it were not one of those things that have a double existence, one as a reality, the other as an idea. No sooner have we begun to enjoy talking than we are enthralled by the idea of talking. We come to be haunted by a dream of talk. The shadow of its perfection falls across the real talk we have, and though we are able to enjoy it, we are ever left a little wistful and disappointed. There is, we feel, something even better just round the corner; its bright promise has shone through every good talk we have had. Eventually, this perfect talk quietly takes its place, among the other perfect things with whose shadows we play in this world, in the Platonic ideal realm, but it is years before we realise it is there and only there, that we are doomed to wander among the tangled roots with the eternally unblemished fruits hanging high beyond our reach. We hurry from company to company, and delightfully the hours flash by, but something is always missing; we

arrived too early or too late for that perfection of talk. And it says something for the quality of this diversion that it should so soon reach up to the ideal, that this life should come at last to seem too short, this world too narrow, for its full blossoming. Only the things of supreme value bring with them this faintly mocking dream, as if we had once known the talk and love and beauty of the gods and had since carried with us some shadowy disturbing memory, quickened by whatever delight we can win for ourselves here. These are the things that show us the narrow limits of this life, as narrow as the grave that waits for us, and yet it is only these things that give us lasting delight and make this world something more than a fretted dust-heap.

Thus it is with talk. Happy indeed have been the hours I have spent in talk with my friends, from dinner till dawn by our firesides, in taverns and clubs and restaurants, marching over moors and mountains, in dug-outs and battered front-line trenches, pacing the London streets at three in the morning, perched on window-seats above fading Cambridge courts, in

trains and inns and ships from Copenhagen to Grasse, Derwentwater to the Caribbean, hours when we all seemed at our stature's full height, twice the boys and men we commonly were, piling up all our experiences and fancies and ideas into one colossal shining heap, its base wreathed in tobacco smoke, and dedicating it to whatever gods there are of friendship. Have we not lavished time and energy, scattering it like the base copper coinage it seemed, in this high service, our talk mounting with the tide of hours, all our dreams out, until there was nothing left but to soar with Ancient Pistol high above the world and worldlings' base, bellowing to one another tidings of "Africa and golden joys"? Have we not sat together, now grown a little older, through some still summer night, made up of dew and stars and honeysuckle, and talked very quietly, with many a pause as the ripples of thought ran softly out, until all disguises and vain egoisms had been shed, every word appeared to be miraculously significant, and we seemed at last a company of souls at peace? And though so many of these

talkers are gone and the years begin to dwindle, the future would have little promise did I not believe that there is still before me this happiness that comes from talk.

So much for what reality has brought. But even with so much, there has always been something missing. I had no sooner plunged into the happy reality of talk than I was haunted by the dream of what talk might be. Nor did I know then, or for many a long day, that I had been bewitched by the idea. Somewhere or other, I felt, in the next street, the next town, some country over the sea, there was a society of people, at once simple and sensitive, passionate and kind, among whom talk grew to perfection. I would have a vision of a great room where you might go almost any time and find there a company of friends and lovers whose talk flowed on enchantingly, and once there you became one with the company, and this talk was yours too. Or I would be visited by thoughts of a garden and a thousand and one long summer nights, and the owners of this garden would be old and wise and kind, and they would

have many lovely and sensitive children, youths and girls of my own age, and a host of wise and witty friends slipping in as the light faded, and we would lounge in groups on the grass or stroll two by two under the trees, and after games and fruit and wine there would be talk, miraculous talk. Thus was I haunted, and brimmed with this starry foolishness I would go from company to company, casting my net ever more widely, happy enough, as I have said, in the friends I made, the talk I had, but ever a little disappointed, a little wistful, still clutching my dwindling belief that round some corner I would come upon that room, that garden. Years passed before I finally, in my inmost heart, abandoned the search, admitting to myself that what I looked for was not to be found, and never could have been found, in this world, that I was cherishing an idea, a dream of talk, an incorruptible thing whose shadow alone was to be discovered here. But have I not, at least, stumbled upon happiness playing with that shadow, talking, talking . . . ?

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